

# Media Literacy:

## An Exciting Tool to Promote Public Health and Safety for Washington's Communities and Schools

April 1999

*"The real voyage of discovery  
consists not in seeking new  
landscapes, but in having new eyes."*

*Marcel Proust*



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# Background

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In the fall of 1998 representatives from the following public and private agencies met to discuss media literacy as a prevention strategy and how to expand its implementation:

- **Department of Health (DOH):**
  - STD/TB Services
  - Child and Adolescent Health
  - Tobacco Prevention
  - Public Health Nutrition
  - Health Promotion
  - Family Planning and Reproductive Health
- **Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS):**
  - Medical Assistance Administration (MAA)
  - Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse (DASA)
  - Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration (JRA)
- **Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI):**
  - Teen Aware Project
  - Health/Fitness Education and HIV/STD Prevention
- **Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development (CTED)**

- **Washington State Parent Teacher Association (PTA)**
- **Comprehensive Health Education Foundation (CHEF)**
- **Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention, Inc.**

This private/public sector consortium enthusiastically expressed interest and “buy-in” to help further media literacy. A subcommittee was formed to develop a draft plan. The following report outlines the need, definition, and potential of this emergent field in Washington’s public health and safety agenda.

# What Is Media Literacy and Why Do We Need It?

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We are surrounded by messages that tell us how to act, what to think, what our roles and expectations in life should be. Some messages come from parents, some from teachers, many from peers, and some from clergy. But the biggest suppliers of both direct and subtle messages are the various forms of media that impact our daily lives. In fact, if one totals the combined time a young person receives messages from parents, teachers and clergy, it is still less than the time the average person sits in front of a television set. And television is only one medium. We have movies, radio, the World Wide Web, video games, billboards, T-shirts and caps, magazines, newspapers, bumper stickers, packaging, on and on.

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***To be media literate is to understand that a media message is produced by someone with an agenda to sell, persuade or change behavior. A message is constructed very carefully to maximize the agenda. To be media literate is to be able to critically interpret your media environment.***

Many of these messages are not necessarily the pro health and pro safety messages we might want to give young people. There are too many themes of violence, drug use, alcohol abuse, and sexual promiscuity. Indeed, there are many respected professionals who argue persuasively that media is a major risk factor for youth today. According to the Center for Media Education, most children are in homes where the television set is on for an average of seven hours and 42 minutes per day. A report from the American Psychological Association in 1995 measured the effects on youth of more than 3,000 hours of broadcast and cable television programming. Fifty-seven percent of all programs contain some depiction of violence. The American Psychological Association estimates the typical child sees 10,000 acts of violence each year. In addition, young people often witness extreme depictions of violence in feature films and are exposed to music videos and lyrics that glamorize drug use and violence. It is therefore not surprising that drug use is going up for youth and that many see violence as a way to settle disagreements.

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The cultural environment includes more than simple exposure to representations of crime, violence, and drug use. Women's and men's bodies are used to sell everything from beer to toothpaste. People of color are stereotyped. Youth are exposed to a relentless stream of advertisements that tell them if they are to be happy they need the right car, the right clothes, the right "look."

With all the messages in our media environment that depict, and often glamorize, condone or promote violence and drug use, what can be done? One tool to deal with this problem is **media literacy**. To be media literate is to be able to analyze, evaluate, and understand the direct and subtle themes of the media message.

Since media messages use techniques of persuasion and emotion, media literacy is the skill to **deconstruct** the message, to understand the pieces that make up the whole, and to understand the messenger's motives so you are not manipulated by them. Media literacy is also the skill to **construct** messages. People are empowered when their voices are heard through the messages they create and disseminate.

## **What Media Literacy Is Not . . .**

Media literacy is not the silver bullet, magic wand, or any other panacea for problems such as unintended pregnancy, drug use, crime, and violence. It is simply another tool that we must explore if we are to create healthier children and families and healthier communities. It is a tool that several nations and U.S. states have introduced into their school curricula.

Media literacy is not media bashing. It sees media as a tool that can be used, misused, and abused. We need to learn to understand and be literate consumers of our media environment. The media industries need to be seen as partners in finding solutions that promote healthier, safer communities.

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***The answer is not to expect people to turn off the television set.***

***The solution, rather, is to educate ourselves to the fact that media messages are a part of our cultural environment.***

# How Does Media Literacy Fit with Public Health, Safety, and Education?

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## **It is a prevention strategy.**

Media literacy is a strategy that addresses public health and safety concerns.

### **Media literacy:**

- Emphasizes skills that help people look critically at their environment and what influences the choices they make.
- Encourages people to be informed consumers and encourages the media to be truthful producers.
- Increases awareness of important factors that influence individual behavior, such as excessive exposure to messages about sex, violence, tobacco use, or poor nutritional practices.
- Increases awareness of environmental supports that encourage healthy and safe communities, neighborhoods, schools, and families.
- Values the role of media as a teaching tool for prevention.

## **It is an educational strategy.**

### **Media literacy offers curricula to:**

- Instruct students to critically analyze and understand media messages.
- Help students understand the process of making choices, and the consequences of those decisions.
- Directly apply Washington State's Learning Goals, such as reading comprehension, communication, core concepts of a variety of disciplines, analytical thinking and problem solving, and the importance of work.
- Explore the social and economic interests of the media.
- Create media messages and resources that give voice to the problems and pressures students face.
- Develop health education media messages on a variety of topics.

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***"I like media literacy because we get to go inside the TV and we get to learn how things work."***

***South Shore Middle School***

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**Media literacy has a role in building healthy communities.**

**It can be applied as:**

- A community-organizing strategy to involve citizens in defining risk and safety factors within their cultural environment.
- A method to engage students and staff in promotion of safe schools.
- A tool for people to evaluate the media messages in their neighborhoods that contribute to violence, crime, and safety concerns.
- A tool to counteract the effects of advertising on youth for topics such as tobacco and alcohol, nutrition, eating disorders and body image, and risky behaviors such as alcohol-impaired driving.

**It can be an adjunct to substance abuse treatment.**

Part of the treatment process for substance abuse is to understand the motives behind the behavior and the environment that encourages it.

**Media literacy can:**

- Help people learn to understand and appreciate the effects that environments have on their behavior.
- Identify “cues” in the environment that affect behavior (as suggested by brain research of the National Institute on Drug Abuse).
- Increase awareness of decision making processes that impact risk and resiliency factors for adolescents.

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***"I think the media glamorize sex. I think they make it seem like it's the 'in thing' to do--it's cool. They don't talk about the emotions that follow."***

***John Rogers High School***

# Media Literacy Research

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## **Media Matters**

*American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)*

The key aspect of their five-year national public education campaign, *Media Matters*, is to teach “basic media literacy” to make “pediatricians, parents and children more aware of the influence that media messages and images can have on children—both mentally and behaviorally, positively and negatively.” Media education is regarded as a key strategy for avoiding public health risks by helping to stem the potential negative effects of media messages.

## **Marjorie Hogan, MD, FAAP**

*American Academy of Pediatrics*

- More than 1,000 studies attest to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children.
- Tobacco and alcohol advertising appears to increase the risk of smoking and drinking by children and adolescents.
- Children are less likely to be influenced by media messages if they have developed skills to refute such messages.

## **Victor Strasburger, MD**

*Adolescent Medicine: State of the Art Reviews, Vol. 4, No. 3, October 1993*

- Violence—clear relationship between media violence and real-life aggression.
- Sex and sexuality—Strong evidence that television powerfully influences teenagers’ sexual attitudes, values, and beliefs.
- Drugs—Studies document that use of drugs by children and adolescents is influenced by the quantity of advertising they see and hear.
- Suicide—Several studies now link television or newspaper publicity about suicide with an increase in teenage suicide. Although the actual cause of this media effect is unknown, role modeling probably plays a significant role.
- Communication experts suggest that media literacy exerts a protective effect against harmful influences of media messages.
- Media literacy programs counteract effects of television viewing. Children and teenagers must learn how to decode the messages contained in television programming, advertising, movies, and music videos.



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### **White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP)**

"Today, young people are increasingly bombarded by a myriad of powerful pro-drug images and messages from TV, film, music, video, advertising, and marketing. ...The result is that children are having more difficulty making healthy lifestyle choices about drugs."

The ONDCP is addressing media influence on young people's attitudes about drugs as follows:

- ONDCP included media literacy in the 1995–98 National Drug Control Strategy.
- ONDCP is collaborating with the AAP's *Media Matters* media literacy campaign.
- ONDCP is conducting a year-long study to document how drugs are portrayed in the media.

### **1995 Carnegie Report**

*Great transitions: Preparing adolescents for a new century.*

"Collectively, the various media are among the most pervasive influences in the lives of young adolescents. Media literacy education provides the opportunity for young adolescents to be active, critical consumers of media's messages."

### **Joseph M Behson and Dennis J Moriarty**

*Office of Children and Family Services, New York State Juvenile Justice System Media Literacy Program*

Research conducted after four years of operation shows:

- Measurable gains in media knowledge.
- Youth are able to transfer the approaches and strategies of media literacy to address other independent living skills (substance abuse prevention, health, parenting skills, etc.).

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***Broad-based media literacy education needs to become a priority in the U.S. and implemented in an interagency, interdisciplinary approach.***

***Safeguarding Our Youth: Violence Prevention for Our Nation's Children***

*Janet Reno, U.S. Attorney General; Richard W. Riley, U.S. Secretary of Education;*

*Donna Shalala, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services*

# What's Been Done in Washington to Further Media Literacy

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Media literacy efforts in the state of Washington include projects sponsored by state agencies, interagency networks, school districts, nonprofits and organizations, and a range of individual media consultants. Here are some examples:

## *State Agency Projects*

### **Teen Aware (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction–OSPI)**

- Video-based media literacy curriculum for middle and high school students.
- The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction used media literacy to implement its Teen Aware Project, part of a statewide effort to reduce teen pregnancy. Middle and high school students research, develop, and produce media campaigns to promote sexual abstinence. Teen Aware productions have received national awards and recognition.

### **Teen Futures (Department of Health–DOH)**

- Two statewide media literacy institutes for health professionals, educators, and others who work with teens.
- Media contest offering media consultants and educational packet.
- Awareness-building community meetings.
- Teen Aware curriculum distributed to all media literacy institute participants.
- Web site fostering awareness and interest in media literacy.

### **Teen Health and the Media (Interagency sponsorship)**

- Statewide media literacy conference focused on health issues and offered for participants representing a range of disciplines.
- Web site highlighting interagency collaboration around teen health issues and the media.

### **Youth Suicide Prevention Program (DOH)**

- Media literacy workshops for youth and educators across four regions in the state.
- Community events to promote awareness of youth media literacy/advocacy efforts.
- Youth-generated media campaigns on suicide prevention.

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**Youth Empowered by  
Abstinence–YEA  
(DOH)**

- Media literacy conference for teens and their adult leaders representing 13 areas of the state.
- Videoconferencing to support ongoing media literacy projects focused on abstinence education.
- Technical assistance to support teen media literacy/abstinence projects.

**Media Literacy Task Force 1997  
(OSPI)**

- Voluntary group of educators interested in promoting state-wide media literacy efforts in education convened for a one-year period.

**Online Media Literacy  
Curriculum Project, 1996  
(OSPI)**

- A group of elementary and secondary educators interested in media literacy.

**Art in Public Places Program  
(Washington State Arts  
Commission)**

- Video art collection for elementary and secondary students distributed to all public schools across the state.

***School District Projects***

**Creating Critical Viewers  
(National Academy of  
Television Arts and Sciences–  
NATAS)**

- Seattle Public Schools selected as the pilot site for the NATAS Creating Critical Viewers (CCV) project.
- Demonstration CCV teachers in 12 middle and high schools.

**Media Literacy Listserv**

- Established in 1997 by a Yakima educator as a follow up of the Online Media Literacy Curriculum Project.

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***"I never knew how much  
commercials tricked us. Now I  
can't just watch the commercial.  
I have to figure out what trick  
they're using."***

***Washington Middle School***

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## **Organizations and Nonprofits**

### **Washington DOC (Doctors Ought to Care)**

- An organization promoting youth smoking prevention and cessation using media literacy and advocacy as a strategy.

### **Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention Program**

- An advocacy and education group using media literacy as one of its strategies.

### **Foundation for Family Television**

- Grassroots organization founded in 1990 with the support of Jean Gardner to raise media literacy awareness in communities and provide media literacy education to parents.

### **911 Media Arts**

- Community-based arts organization that focuses on media production and offers media literacy education for youth.

### ***Seattle Times*: Newspapers in Education Program**

- Offers online and hard copy media literacy materials focused on the newspaper for teachers in the Seattle area.

### **Washington State Association of Broadcasters**

- Developed Ad Wise, Advertising Awareness Curriculum, for use in Washington schools.

### **Teen-Media.Net**

- A media literacy/advocacy training, service, and research network based in the College of Education at the University of Washington.
- A virtual network for groups, organizations, and agencies that share a strong commitment to promoting and supporting the teen voice.
- Provides a repository of multimedia resources for parents and adults who work with children and youth.
- Uses media as a hook to engage youth attention to important health issues.

### **Washington State PTA**

- Designated media literacy as a priority topic in 1995–97 and collaborated with the Foundation for Family Television to distribute a “media wellness” packet to PTA groups throughout the state under the title “Be Smart, Watch Smart.”

### **Northwest Alliance for Responsible Television**

- A grassroots group in Spokane that has a special focus on television violence.

# What Other States and the Federal Government Are Doing

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Media literacy was first brought to national attention in 1995 when the White House **Office of National Drug Control Policy** convened an inter-departmental meeting of federal agencies and the private sector to explore this strategy as a tool to enable parents to guide their children away from destructive behaviors. As a result of this conference, the White House incorporated media literacy into the national **Drug Abuse Prevention Strategy**.

Following this lead, other federal departments have been working to support and encourage media literacy. The **Center for Substance Abuse Prevention** asked its community partnership grantees to build media literacy as one of the environmental strategies the partnership could employ. Several federal agencies including the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Justice, National Institute on Drug Abuse**, and the **Department of Transportation** combined efforts to support an annual national conference.

While there is no major policy directive yet, federal agencies support the media literacy approach. The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** and the **National Institute on Drug Abuse** have both expressed a desire to do more to advocate for this emerging field. Several states are aggressively moving forward.

**American Lung Association** and the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** employ media literacy as a strategy for tobacco prevention.

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### **New Mexico**

The state now requires media education to be taught during the K–12 years. New Mexico has developed a model curriculum called “Just Do Media Literacy.”

### **Massachusetts**

Media literacy is a major part of the curriculum of the Communications Schools at both Harvard and Babson College. Professors from both of these institutions of higher education regularly contribute to the national dialogue on the cultural environment in which Americans raise their children.

The Essex County District Attorney has developed a media literacy curriculum called “Flash Point.” Juveniles in detention or deferred prosecution are enrolled.

### **Colorado**

The state’s interagency prevention coalition has encouraged providers to include media literacy as a tool for environmental change.

### **States Requiring Media Literacy Education**

Georgia  
Minnesota  
New Jersey  
New Mexico  
Oregon  
North Carolina  
South Carolina  
Virginia

# Expanding Media Literacy in Washington

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## Potential Action Steps

- Plan ways to use the existing Web sites to further media literacy, such as facilitating and showcasing teen projects and providing a materials distribution center.
- Identify other groups to participate/collaborate.
- Determine funding requirements for materials and training-of-trainers to build awareness and skills among health educators and prevention professionals.
- Collect studies on media literacy effectiveness.
- Get media literacy included as a strategy option in upcoming grants.
- Create a broadly-owned vision.
- Develop marketing tools.
- Tie into Health and Safety Networks.
- Gain buy-in of policy and decision makers.
- Create incentives for youth to be involved.
- Apply for federal and foundation funding for conferences and youth projects.
- Explore integration into K-12 schools and colleges.
- Encourage higher education to include media literacy in teacher education.
- Use the K-20 system to bring youth together through video-conferencing technology.
- Include in professional development training for health and human services staff.
- Develop curricula specific to Washington.
- Develop model public policies around media literacy.
- Request legislation to promote and provide funding.
- Identify a pool of trainers and leaders.
- Involve parent groups.
- Work with media to be part of the solution.
- Expand awareness of media literacy to the general public.

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***"I used to be able to just watch TV and relax. Now I have to think about it."***

***McClure Middle School***